



# Are New Faculty Prepared to Teach Diverse Learners?

By Audrey A. Lail

A quality teaching mission not only defines a community college, but also affects the caliber of its faculty (Cohen & Brawer, 1972). In his 1980 study of community-college professional development, J. Ellerbe stated that competent faculty members are critical to quality instruction. Yet he agreed with renowned higher educational researcher J. Gaff, who lamented, “Most faculty members readily confess that they learned to teach by being thrown into the classroom and either sinking or swimming” (as cited in Ellerbe, 1980, p. 1). Years later, another distinguished educational writer, W. Grubb (1999), in his critical exposé on the current quality of community-college education, made a similar indictment that new faculty do not enter classrooms any readier to teach their students than many of the students themselves come prepared to learn.

Community-college researchers concede that although content mastery is a critical requisite in the faculty selection process, pedagogical proficiency beyond the ability to lecture is rarely a consideration (Miller, Finely, & Vancko, 2000; Roueche, Milliron, & Roueche, 2003). Meanwhile, the 21<sup>st</sup>-century student population is becoming more diverse, leaving us to wonder whether a new generation of faculty exhibits the necessary skills to address the growing diverse-learner needs. Furthermore, even as faculty members have access to ample professional-development programs, these activities are rarely required or designed specifically for new instructors (Fugate & Amey, 2000; Grubb, 1999).

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## Trends in Faculty Background

Many of the community-college faculty hired during the 1960s and 1970s had initially embarked on K-12 teaching but moved into community-college instruction after discovering



they preferred adult education and college schedules. While these former K-12 teachers had little to no instruction in how adults learn, their formative teaching years were amply filled with fundamental educational philosophies and pre-service teaching internships (Evelyn, 2001; Fugate & Amey, 2000).

Other instructors who intended to become university professors found the tenure process and its research and publishing requirements unappealing; therefore, they too opted for community-college careers. Although graduate schools seldom offered them formal pedagogy, many graduate assistants had opportunities to gain teaching experience in environments filled with faculty role models and mentors (Evelyn, 2001; Fugate & Amey, 2000; Gaff, 1973; Wilson, 1999).

These two groups – the former K-12 teachers and graduate assistants – have developed into today's core of community-college faculty. Their skills and dedication are largely responsible for the success of today's community colleges (Berry, Hammons, & Denny, 2001).

However, beginning in the 1990s, a new group of faculty began to emerge who did not originally envision a career in education. This new group prepared for other non-academic careers and came to the classroom as a second vocational opportunity, either by chance or as a result of self-actualization. Although finding their present teaching experience enjoyable, they are without the early exposure to a formal educational process intended to shape them into teaching professionals. While these new instructors entered community-college instruction with great commitment to our mission and possibly even with great mastery of their disciplines, they still emerged with pedagogical deficiencies (Evelyn, 2001; Fugate & Amey, 2000).

### **Changing Influences**

Most state legislatures are colliding with an array of challenges that directly affect the quality of community-college teaching. First, many states are reacting to sporadic funding shortfalls and are reducing budgets across all agencies, including community colleges (Burnett, 2003; Taylor, 2003). Secondly, most community colleges adhere to open-door admission policies and are becoming overwhelmed with record enrollments of unemployed workers, minorities, reverse-transfers, and teenagers of baby boomers. The fiscal tensions these new students have generated are provoking legislators to demand more stringent, unprecedented accountability from community colleges, which places additional stress on faculty to educate these students quickly so that they can return to the workforce (Evelyn, 2001).

This enrollment frustration is further exacerbated as instructors must help large numbers of underprepared, ethnically diverse students first



achieve basic, college-entry level skills before they then progress to standard college-level coursework. This struggle is made especially difficult as many faculty continue in a lecture-style orientation that was once accepted but is no longer considered optimal (Brewer, 1999; Murray, 2001, 2002; Van Ast, 1999; Waycaster, 2001).

Finally, many community-college faculty members who were hired during the early 1970s are now approaching retirement. Nationally, almost all community colleges are experiencing a historically pivotal moment within their faculty ranks. Numerous experienced instructors are being replaced with a new generation of educators. Projections put the overall replacement need at nearly 25 percent across the nation. At the center of this juncture are the remaining faculty members, many of whom were hired within the last five years. Clearly, the fabric of community-college faculty is changing (Berry, Hammons, & Denny, 2001; Yates, 2001).

### **Pedagogical Challenges**

During our era of corporate downsizing, many professionals seek faculty positions in community colleges. Although their real-world backgrounds bring poignancy to classroom instruction, college administrators are finding these faculty hopefuls difficult to place. A recent article in *The Herald-Sun* reported,

It's not enough to simply put someone who has worked at a pharmaceutical company, engineering firm, or other field in front of a classroom. . . . To be a community-college instructor, someone has to convey information effectively, manage students who learn differently, and keep up with changes in his or her field of expertise. (Forest, 2003, p. 2)

Robert Kimball, department chair at Wake Technical Community College in North Carolina, agreed with that assessment:

A lot of people with a technical background who are laid off do come to us. But their technical background doesn't mean they can walk into a math or physics classroom and do the job we expect with the technology available and required today. Math instructors today must build other skills in students, such as problem solving, critical thinking, and communicating mathematically. There is a steep learning curve. (as cited in Yates, 2001, p. 9)

Many of these instructors arrive on our campuses only vaguely aware of the preparedness issues they will face, especially as some in higher education



contend that the command of subject matter is not only important but also sufficient, that any teaching skills beyond a lecture mastery of the discipline is not as consequential (Berry, Hammons, & Denny, 2001; Fayne & Ortquist-Ahrens, 2006; Grubb, 1999).

Yet a major curricular revolution has emerged. We have certainly heard a call for the pivotal shift from teacher-centered instruction to learner-centered learning, which is generating new teaching-learning models. With this call comes urgency – that all community-college faculty become as skilled in the detection, identification, and implementation of diverse student-learning styles and challenges as they are in their discipline contents (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Van Ast, 1999).

### **Are Our New Faculty Adapting?**

The few studies available about new faculty members' teaching show that regardless of integrating some learning-centered strategies (mainly in technology use), most continue to rely on traditional teaching practices such as lecture and exams in an objective format, which continue the teacher-dominance model (Lail, 2005; NSOPF, 1999). Additionally, whether early-career instructors adapt to new teaching strategies is influenced primarily by their respective disciplines. Grubb (1999), Lail (2005), Palmer (2002), and Wallin (2003) reported that while faculties in engineering, business technologies, and health services were more likely to integrate learning-centered constructs (albeit sporadically), early-career math instructors still seemed to be the most traditional in their teaching practices. Further, it was determined through cross-sectional analysis that although instructors across all disciplines might use some of the same practices, there were also marked differences in the number and kinds of learning-centered strategies employed (Lail 2005).

Researchers also showed that the basic reasons for continued use of the lecture and objective exam format are more external – not just a reflection of instructors' preferences. Results indicated that the following aspects of the community-college structure have perpetuated a traditional teaching approach: teaching overloads, underprepared students, academic isolation, inadequate performance-appraisal instruments, scathing student evaluations, artificial time constraints imposed by stagnated program substructures, and underproductive 50-minute class periods. Acting as major impediments, such practices and conditions can cause even the most ardent new, learning-centered instructors to turn to teaching more defensively, which means using a traditional lecture format (Fayne & Ortquist-Ahrens, 2006; Lail, 2005).





Additionally, although the results showed that the specifics of each teaching discipline had marked impact on the kinds of teaching practices that were incorporated or avoided, many early-career instructors still desired to adopt learning-centered teaching because they knew that these strategies met the hands-on, active-learning needs of their adult students. However, most of them maintained that the biased cultures of their respective departments inhibited any substantial changes to the way they taught their students, stating that their department administrators placed more emphasis on programs meeting institutional policy and full-time equivalent objectives than on employing teaching innovations (Lail, 2005).

Research results further showed that some beginning instructors found the on-the-job training principles to which they were exposed in their former careers (i.e., law enforcement, health care, and paraprofessional others) influenced the way they taught their own students (Lail, 2005). These accounts can be linked to other research suggesting that guidelines promoting modern on-the-job training are based on the same adult-learning principles that drive learning-centered instruction (Wentland, 2003).

This realization connects to another important finding: prior teaching experience has a strong association to learning-centeredness, as early-career instructors with facilitator/trainer backgrounds reported higher percentages for learning-centered teaching practices than those with other prior teaching experiences. And, unexpectedly, graduate assistants from four-year colleges became more traditional instructors despite their extended immersion in the academic experience (Lail, 2005). Consequently, Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1998) asserted that the most recent wave of new faculty must be proactive toward teaching preparedness. Svinicki, Hagen, and Meyer (1996) advise instructors to grasp the how and why of adult learning that supports contemporary practices.

Nevertheless, in a recent study surveying 143 early-career instructors across 58 North Carolina community colleges, the results showed that only half of them were satisfied with the quality of their professional development, with only a quarter feeling that such activities had a distinct effect on their teaching practices (Lail, 2005). These findings matched the 2002 North Carolina Community College System survey results; both studies agreed with other researchers who maintained that most professional-development programs are erratic and ineffectual (Grubb, 1999; Murray 2001, 2002).

These same studies found that early-career faculty preferred attending discipline-specific conferences, reviewing discipline-specific textbooks, and engaging in discipline-specific advanced study. Few



responders preferred participation in topics regarding pedagogical theories, learning-centered strategies, and classroom-assessment techniques.

Actually, over two-thirds of the responders showed a lack of interest in acquiring diverse-learner strategies, stating that those kinds of professional-development activities were too nonspecific and poorly targeted (Lail, 2005).

### **Implications for Community Colleges**

Most U.S. community-college systems are faced with retraining hundreds of thousands of adult students who have not been prepared for college. Their learning success is now mandated by another changing paradigm: higher education is no longer about weeding out failing, passive learners but rather about seeking successful learning outcomes for all students, regardless of the diversity of their preparedness (Cohen, 1998). Since lowering the integrity of the curriculum is not an option, then new modes of instruction must be accommodated with all due speed to meet this outcomes objective (Gaff & Ratcliff, 1997; Lail, 2005).

Further, whereas learning within the community-college environment is no longer just about the basics but now extends to contemporary forms of vocational education, instructors must find a way to replicate the new workplaces as closely as possible by using strategies advocated by the learning-centered model. The constant transformations in all work environments, especially due to changing technologies and competency-based pressures, make it critical that the learning-centered directive extend across all disciplines, including the historical fiefdoms of educational-core disciplines (Gaff & Ratcliff, 1997). Tomlin (1997) warned, “The race to the next century is not going to be a simple jog in the park. It is going to be a multi-gaited event with prizes going to those who are the fastest to learn the new rules of a rapidly changing world” (p. 20). Myriads of proprietary universities and corporate-training centers are racing to the education market with a constant stream of teaching innovations contrived to compete for today’s students (Tomlin, 1997); if most community colleges persist in their traditional deliveries of instruction, the community-college model could become readily outmoded in a 21<sup>st</sup>-century academic market.

Based on their expanded use of environmental scanning and analysis, community colleges must go beyond changing program policies and content; they also must re-engineer the teaching processes within the various disciplines to support the learning-centered model (Grubb, 1999). The barriers that slow this progression must be evaluated, and our educational leaders and our faculty (from all teaching disciplines) must



seek ways to break them down. Before any meaningful reconstruction can take place, however, these same leaders must first educate their own faculty members about the seriousness of completing the learning-centered paradigm shift. Although administrators may think such change on the part of faculty is too difficult, it can be accomplished through transformational leadership (Kotter, 1996).

### **Implementing the Change**

Because community-college instructors influence profound change in their students' lives, they can become productive transformational partners. However, one early-career instructor exclaimed that his administrators had failed to get a buy-in from the faculty (Lail, 2005). Therefore, more effective ways must be created to convince faculty – especially early-career instructors who are the next generation of community-college educators – that they can complete the change predicted by Myran and Zeiss (as cited in O'Banion, 1996, p. 4).

Oromaner in his 1986 research stressed that by institutionalizing scholarship, the teaching role can be revitalized. Faia (1976) found a significant relationship between those who voluntarily pursue scholarship with the earning of teaching awards. Yet recent studies found that fewer than 40 percent of beginning faculty responders reported a strong commitment to scholarly activities; this 40 percent consisted of those holding graduate degrees and/or intending to earn doctorates (Lail, 2005).

In a 2003 address before administrators and faculty, J. Roueche stated that community colleges were internationally renowned in meeting the educational and workforce training needs for business and industry, yet those same institutions need to bring more attention to the instructional development and service-training needs of its own faculties and staffs, especially in the integration of learner-centered strategies. Although system-wide and campus-wide professional development has its critical place, those professional-development activities that are centered around the standards, intended outcomes, and cultures of specific academic departments are the most valued and effective (Nathan, 1994).

Boice (1992) agreed that the instructional deans and department chairs are best suited to recognize their faculty's teaching needs and to lead in conducting successful instructional development. In particular, department chairs and lead instructors are in the best position to decide the direction for their faculty members' instructional development. Each discipline has its own indigenous standards and unique norms that a generic, one-size-fits-all professional-development program ignores. Thus, a faculty-



development program that includes chairs and lead instructors can best focus and adjust the professional-development contents to the particular demands and resources that are critical both within a given discipline and department. Equally important, the department chairs can drive new teaching practices necessary to complete any curricular changes that best produce student learning (Eble & McKeachie, 1985).

As we know, department chairs are typically laden with heavy teaching loads and administrative duties, and too often the position of department chair is seen as a chore. Community colleges must find ways to help department chairs lead in faculty development; likewise, we must give more effective enticements to encourage faculty to serve as department chairs (Nathan, 1994). Although better compensation is a start, administrators can also

- raise the perceived value of the department chair;
- provide attractive professional and leadership training so that the chair's role as a faculty development manager can be viewed as important to the success of the department and linked to the institutional strategic frame;
- apportion the appropriate amount of authority and resources to allow chairs the flexibility to adjust workloads and allocate funding for effective professional-development activities; and
- maintain a strong, continuous partnership with instructional deans and chief academic officers, especially in the areas of teaching objectives, workload flexibility, and professional-development funding issues (Nathan, 1994).

In addition, academic departments need to deepen their relationships with the various professional- and discipline-specific affiliations that provide resources and current information regarding the careers associated with the various disciplines.

Learning-centered instruction is not an ideal owned by higher education; it has become universally espoused within different professional and academic associations, as well (Haneline, 2000). Research showed that early-career faculty valued their professional- and discipline-specific associations. Therefore, partnering the resources and knowledge bases of these external affiliations with their corresponding disciplinary departments can only strengthen the resolve of their early-career faculty to make use of professional-development opportunities (Lail, 2005). As J. Gaff argued,



Faculty development is not simply something “nice” to do. The evidence indicates that it is a very important strategy for strengthening . . . education by changing the curriculum. By improving the nature of teaching and learning within courses, and by keeping the focus on the people at the heart of the enterprise – students and faculty members. . . . As such, it is in everyone’s self-interest to operate a substantial program that supports the professional growth of the faculty as teachers of . . . education. (as cited in Sell & Lounsberry, 1997, p. 662)

This view placed great responsibility upon beginning community-college faculty to make sure that their teaching practices are sensitive to the learning needs of their students and thus are continually pliant and effectual. Just as their four-year faculty colleagues are seeking tenure through publishing, teaching, and serving, community-college faculty must also find professional equilibrium by maintaining proficiency in their disciplines, persisting in their institutional-service commitments, and staying engaged in mastering their teaching vocations.

With these efforts, early-career faculty can then assist their community colleges in truly becoming learner-based institutions.

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